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ABSTRACT

Until the quantity, quality, and utility for policy development of research literature on rural education is improved, the potential for furthering the current national momentum of interest in rural education cannot be realized. Explanations for the limited research literature include a lack of appreciation for differences between rural and urban schools, rural education's limited appeal in the academic community, the small number of professionals who devote careers to continuous rural education study, little networking in professional and research communities, no perceived crisis in rural education, no consensus concerning foci of rural research, and limited research support from the National Institute of Education. Essential steps in constructing a research agenda are developing paradigms to guide future inquiry, and developing initial consensus concerning substantive centers of needed work. Themes suggested for concentration are problems of minority and special populations; characteristics of effective rural schools; characteristics of effective leadership; determinants and consequences of interorganizational collaboration; and support for claims that rural schools are superior because of greater individualized instruction, greater community involvement, and local control. Initiatives that would elevate the current status of research include developing a meaningful taxonomy of rural schools, supporting university research centers and journals specializing in reporting rural education research, and establishing a process to promote vital initiatives. (NEC)

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TOWARD THE CONSTRUCTION OF A RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT AGENDA FOR RURAL EDUCATION

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TOWARD THE CONSTRUCTION OF A RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT AGENDA FOR RURAL EDUCATION

Supporters of rural schools find themselves in a quandary. At a time when rural education interests enjoy unprecedented organizational ability at the national level and in many states and are thus better able to further their cause than in the past, they have a growing but nonetheless limited and still largely nonadditive research base to support many of their claims or the values and benefits of small schools. Adding to their dilemna is the increasing awareness in the policy communities of the centrality of education to the relatively ambitious rural development efforts underway in the nation at the present time. Thus, the absence of a comprehensive and inclusive research literature on rural schools represents a major obstacle to the furtherance of rural interests at a time when the potential for fundamental change in rural education policy is perhaps the greatest in recent history. It is imperative that the profession give immediate attention to closing the research gap that presently exists in the field so that the unmatched potential afforded by the conflux of a renewed interest in rural schools by the policy communities and the heightened ability of rural education interests to impact on policy formulation not be lost.

This essay is intended to further this effort. Presented initially are some observations concerning the current

state-of-the-art in research on rural education, followed by a number of explanations for the present situation. The themes of what are regarded to be essential first steps in the construction of a research and development agenda and those of a number of other useful initiatives toward this end are also identified.

In preparation for this assignment, I reviewed a number of the works of others who have also undertaken the task of arguing for a research agenda in other fields. I am especially indebted to Erickson (1979) and Boyan (1981) who offered provacative essays on the state-of-the-art in research on educational administration. Many of their ideas greatly influenced this piece as did those of Browne and Hadwiger (1982) who edited a recent symposium that examined rural policy.

Some Observations on the Current Research Literature

A number of general observations concerning the current research literature on rural education are offered. These comments are not based on a sophisticated mega analysis of the available literature but rather represent the judgement of a close observer of the rural scene from a number of different perspectives during much of the past twenty-five year period, initially as a teacher and superintendent of schools in three rural communities in the midwest. The summary critique reported here was in turn reviewed and generally supported by a number of recognized scholars in the field and by others who

have had recent program responsibilities for funding rural education research and development grants and are extremely knowledgeable about the existing literature.

The first observation is that when viewed as a whole, the literature is meager and much of it lacks sophistication. Moreover, there is not at present a body of research providing a comprehensive and inclusive view of rural education that even begins to approach that on education in an urban setting, one useful benchmark on which to judge relative quantity and quality.

Having offered these general comments, let me be somewhat more specific on at least three important dimensions of the current literature, its quantity, quality, and utility for consumption by the policy communities. With regard to the first cut, the quantity of the literature, I would observe that it is a short shelf. Moreover, much of what is available are development pieces. As an applied field, one might expect to find a substantial portion of the literature to be of this type. But its utility for policy consumption is limited. And, much of the existing literature is experience based. Again, this is needed and frequently valuable. There is also a lot of craft knowledge on that short shelf. This too can frequently serve a useful function. And there is a good deal of well thought through and solid advocacy pieces on a large number of issues facing rural and small schools. But this too must be recognized for its limitations.

With regard to the quantity dimension, then, there is not a substantial body of good descriptive, historical, or experimental research that is data rich, appropriately designed, or is characterized by other indicators of quality research. There are not enough studies of the calibre of the four-day school week research conducted recently in Colorado that I would hold out as an exemplary study that has utility for consumption by the policy community (Richburg and Edelen, 1981). Nor are there many case studies that I am aware of that are on a par with Nachtegal's (1980) descriptive study of school improvement efforts in fourteen rural schools. Vocational education has been the focus of a number of good research efforts, especially the collection by Cosby (1978), and the policy oriented work by Rosenfeld (1981). And clearly, Abt Associates (1978) major study of change in rural schools utilized an extremely sophisticated research design. And Barker and Muse (1983) have filled an important gap by providing the first major descriptive study of characteristics of the nation's smallest local districts, those enrolling fewer than 900 students.

With regard to the second cut through the available literature, its quality dimension, as suggested previously, much of the work tends to be experience based, craft knowledge, or advocacy pieces. However, some of the advocacy literature is laced with good descriptive data, especially the collection by Sher (1977). The value of this work in alerting the policy

communities to the problems and issues and strengths of rural schools is undeniable. The finance studies completed by the Education Commission of the States would certainly be judged by most to be of high quality. The traditional disadvantage of rural schools in securing their equitable share of federal aid has been the focus of several strong pieces, especially that by Bass and Berman (1979). Also, a number of studies on the structural features of rural schools is of good quality although with regard to one important aspect of the structure of education, the long-standing debate regarding school size, we are still largely without answers that are policy applicable.

The third cut through the literature that is of value is to view the shelf from the perspective of its utility for policy development for the improvement of educational practice. The ultimate test of the quantity and quality of research on rural education, or in any field, is whether or not it provides answers, or partial answers, to the really big agenda items facing the nation for the past quarter century and are likely to continue to be in the forefront in the future. I'm referring of course to those two over-arching concerns of the equity issue and the effective school issue.

Concerning the first of these, the equity issue, it is my observation that with regard to the fiscal dimension of this issue, we still know little about the determinants and consequences of various fiscal arrangements for rural education

in diverse settings. With regard to the equality of opportunity dimension of the equity issue, we know very little about special populations attending rural schools although Fratoe's (1980) work on the educational characteristics of blacks living in non-metropolitan areas is a useful descriptive study as is his companion piece on the educational characteristics of non-metropolitan Hispanics (Fratoe, 1981). And, the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools has over the years sponsored descriptive data efforts on two other special populations of rural students, migrants and Indians.

With regard to the effective schools issue, some of the rural education literature argues strongly for extensive community involvement in the workings of exemplary rural schools, as does the relatively recent school effectiveness studies, most of which, it should be noted, has been done at urban sites. And, most of the research on effective leadership has also been done in schools in urban areas.

Let me summarize this brief critique with the reminder that we have in this nation a situation where a sector of public education, rural schools, that comprises a substantial per cent of the nations approximately 16,000 local school districts and who serve approximately one-third of the nations elementary-secondary school age population is a huge enterprise. Yet, we know relatively little about how it works in its varied settings, or the ultimate test, as measured by what we should

know in terms of our ability to respond to the major agenda issues facing the nation.

How does one explain this situation that in a word must be labeled neglect, and, are there clues in the past experience that can be of benefit in formulating strategies that will aid in the construction of a desperately needed comprehensive and inclusive research and development agenda at this critical juncture?

Some Explanations of the Existing Limited Research Literature

The relatively dismal assessment that I hold of the available literature is attributable to a large number of factors. It is important that rural education interests be concerned about possible explanations if long-term improvement is to be forthcoming.

I would offer for consideration seven lines of explanations. Some of these are a reflection on the profession generally while others are peculiar to rural education. Many are no doubt interrelated although I will not attempt to establish possible relationships in these brief comments.

The first cause, I believe, stems from the long-standing lack of appreciation for the demonstrable difference between rural and urban schools. Rural schools do have a different set of problems to deal with in attempting to organize and implement educational programs. And the environment that this must be done in is also appreciably different in many important

ways. Yet the assumption still widely held in many quarters is that this is not so with the result that what is offered for urban consumption, where most of the research has been directed, is somehow judged by many to be transferrable automatically to a rural setting.

A second major contributing factor is that rural education has generally lacked appeal in the academic community comparable to the excitement of urban education which has in many ways justifiably occupied center stage in the policy communities in recent years, especially on the federal level. Closely related, and as might be expected, there is not at present a large number of professionals who have devoted their careers to the continuous study of rural education. Much of the research that has been done is by individuals having at best what would appear to be a secondary interest in rural education, or by those who spend time and energy on rural education problems and issues sporadically.

A fourth contributing factor is that there historically has been little networking in the professional and research communities, especially at the national level. Certainly some of the recent initiatives such as the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) Small Schools Program and that of the revitalized Rural Education Association have great potential and are already serving as important networking systems. For example, one of the recent initiatives of the AASA was the completion of a directory of resources for rural

schools (**The Sourcebook, 1983**). One of the objectives of this effort is the promotion of networking in the rural education communities at the national, regional, and state levels. But these developments are relatively new and their impact is just beginning to be felt.

Contrast this situation with the networking that has been in place for a number of years by urban education interests. For example. The Council of Great City Schools, in existence since the early 1960's, has an impressive record in promoting the interests of urban schools. Moreover, the National Institute of Education (NIE) has for the past five years worked systematically with the superintendents of twenty-two urban school systems that hold membership in the Urban Superintendents Network. Two-way communication is greatly facilitated in this arrangement: on the one hand, the superintendents are able to communicate directly their research needs to the NIE; and, the NIE has a platform in place to provide continuous dissemination of the latest research on topics of interest to urban districts. The benefits of this arrangement for both parties are obvious. No such counterpart exists for rural education interests within the NIE or as a result of foundation supported efforts as is the case for the Council of Great City Schools.

A fifth major explanation is that unlike urban education, rural education has not been the focus of intense concern in the policy communities because there has not been a widespread

perceived crisis in rural education comparable to the perceived situation in urban schools. This, despite the fact that rural schools represent a significant part of the public education enterprise in the nation, and in virtually every state, even the most urbanized. While it might be difficult to convince many that some rural school districts, especially those in the Midwest, hardly face a crisis situation comparable to many urban schools, this is clearly not so with regard to many deprived special populations of rural students. But the case has not been made sufficiently, although rural interests would likely have had difficulty in recent years in competing for attention.

A sixth explanation for the meager existing research literature is related to what appears to be confusion concerning the domain or rural education. There does not appear to be a consensus concerning the foci of research that should be conducted resulting in a wide ranging array of research and development endeavors. And, most importantly, this has no doubt contributed to a fragmentation of the limited research energies and monies that are expended.

And, finally, certainly the relatively late emergence of the National Institute of Education is a major contributing factor. It is important to note that the NIE has been responsible for supporting most of the limited rural education research that has been undertaken in recent years. And most of these efforts have been launched approximately midway in the

Institute's brief history. One could expect to have many more gaps in the research literature reasonably satisfied in the future if the Institute is allowed to at least maintain its existing limited resource commitment for the promotion of research on rural education.

Essental First Steps in the Construction of an R & D Agenda

What knowledge does the past experience offer those who would like to turn the present situation around so that real, long-term gains for rural education policy can be initiated and sustained? It seems to me that two essential first steps must be taken. First, we must develop a number of over-arching research paradigms to guide future inquiry. Secondly, and also at a minimum, we must develop an initial consensus concerning
the substantiative centers of needed work that is to be done within the previously selected over-arching research paradigms.

Regarding the first essential prerequisite, there needs to be a clarification of the domain we are concerned about when we speak of rural education. I am not calling for a search and consensus regarding a meta theory or a meta analytical scheme for the study of all of rural education for this would be foolish, counter-productive, and not attainable anyway. But surely we could search for and agree on a small number of theories and conceptual and analytical frameworks

that hold promise of being beneficial in contributing to many of the major agenda items facing rural education.

For example, I would argue that one of the over-arching paradigms that holds great potential is policy analysis--that is defined by Dror (1978) and others to be concerned about the process and methodology for the design, identification, and selection of preferable alternative choices for complex policy issues. Among the many benefits of the use of this approach, the following seem especially appealing: its potential conceptual and analytical richness, its potential synthesizing qualities in that it calls for the use of multiple methodological approaches from different disciplines that have value in understanding the characteristics and workings of rural schools; and, its potential for encouraging collaboration between policy makers and scholars.

Whether or not one agrees with this assessment of the value of policy analysis as one promising research paradigm, the point that is to be emphasized here is that the construction of a meaningful research and development agenda is absolutely dependent upon first establishing a small number of research paradigms to guide inquiry. Otherwise, we are likely to see a continuation of the fragmentation and non-additive features characterizing past efforts.

Some of the best evidence of the need to do this is to be found in examining the relative progress being made in other applied fields. Most noticeably here is the comparatively

advanced state of research and development in the fields of political science and rural sociology. These two disciplines devote substantial organizational energies in debating the strengths and weaknesses of research paradigms judged to be of value. Inquiry in these fields is subsequently influenced by the consensus (albeit, frequently rough!) that emerges from the continuous debates of this type that occur in these fields.

The second prerequisite for the construction of a research and development agenda for rural education is the need for an initial consensus concerning the substantiative problem centers of work that is to be done within the previously selected research paradigms. Rural education is one of the most challenging areas of research because there are so many topics that would benefit from intensive study. However, the themes of areas that I believe the profession ought to concentrate on are few in number:

- problems of minority groups and those of other special populations served by rural schools.
- characteristics of effective rural schools, especially at the secondary level.
- characteristics of effective leadership in rural schools.
- the determinants and consequences of interorganizational collaboration.
- support for the frequent claim that rural schools are superior because of greater individualized instruction.
- support for the frequent claim that rural schools are

better because of greater community involvement and local control.

The six themes do not constitute a new agenda and are not offered as such. However, they collectively touch on many of the vital issues that still confront the policy communities. Moreover, they would benefit from new inquiries using other theoretical orientations than were perhaps applied in the past.

Other Meaningful Initiatives

A number of other initiatives should be launched that would also elevate the current status of research and development and begin to find answers to the recurring issues that hamper the effects of those concerned about the quality of schooling in rural America. Four initiatives are especially critical and are introduced here: development of a meaningful taxonomy of rural schools, support for university research centers, support for journals that specialize in reporting research and developments in rural education, and the establishment of a process for promoting initiatives judged by the profession to be vital.

The need for a valid taxonomy of rural schools is uppermost. This step is an important prerequisite for the design of appropriate research that would attempt to compare schools that serve rural populations. To aid this long-term effort, we need to identify the characteristics of the external environments in which rural schools function, their mode of

operation, and their products, the three generally accepted central considerations in taxonomic efforts, and, ultimately, to meaningful comparative evaluations. Rural schools in New England are different from those in the Southeastern states, that in turn are as equally different from those in the Midwest. Yet we tend to blur these differences and speak of rural education as an entity. In remarks prepared for a 1982 U.S. Department of Education sponsored conference, Gjettin offered one typology of rural schools that appears to have merit as a beginning in this endeavor. His system, which is based on socio-economic characteristics, cultural background, and demographic characteristics, uses five classes of rural schools of: stable, depressed, high growth, "re-born", and isolated (Ensuring Excellence in Rural Education, 1982).

The professional community needs to support the relatively ambitious development of university research centers that specialize in rural education that have been established at an increasing number of sites across the country. Numerous benefits of the development should result. The creation of the centers should faciliate the establishment of a critical mass of scholars having a long-term commitment to systematically pursue inquiry in rural education problems and issues. Moreover, the exposure of a greater number of graduate students than in the past to a rural education orientation is also likely to result. Additionally, the cadre of scholars staffing the centers should serve as one of the important core groups

for an accelerated networking effort.

Rural education interests must also support the development of strong, viable journals that focus on research and development in rural schools. Published educational research is the major means by which the profession acquires much of its understanding. The Rural Educator is a promising development in this regard, as in the Research in Rural Education. These efforts must be supported by the professional community.

And, finally, there is a need to develop a process for establishing the over-arching research paradigms that are to guide inquiry and for selection of the substantiative centers of needed research. A collaborative effort by the two major national organizations of rural interests, the Rural Education Association and the American Association of School Administrators Small Schools Program, is appealing as an organizational vehicle to initiate the process and provide needed stability and long-term continuity. And, it would seem that the results of a joint effort of this type would not only attract the interest of potential funding sources but that of scholars as well, with or without funding. Groups of scholars with an interest in rural education are now being promoted in a number of national professional organizations, especially the American Educational Research Association and the National Conference of Professors of Educational Administration, and these developments should facilitate a hoped for early link with practitioners.

Concluding Comments

There is a momentum of interest in rural education building in this nation. This momentum is likely not to reach its full potential until a comprehensive and inclusive research literature on education in a rural setting is forthcoming. Rural interests have the greatest stake in this effort and must take the lead in the construction of a research agenda that is policy applicable.

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